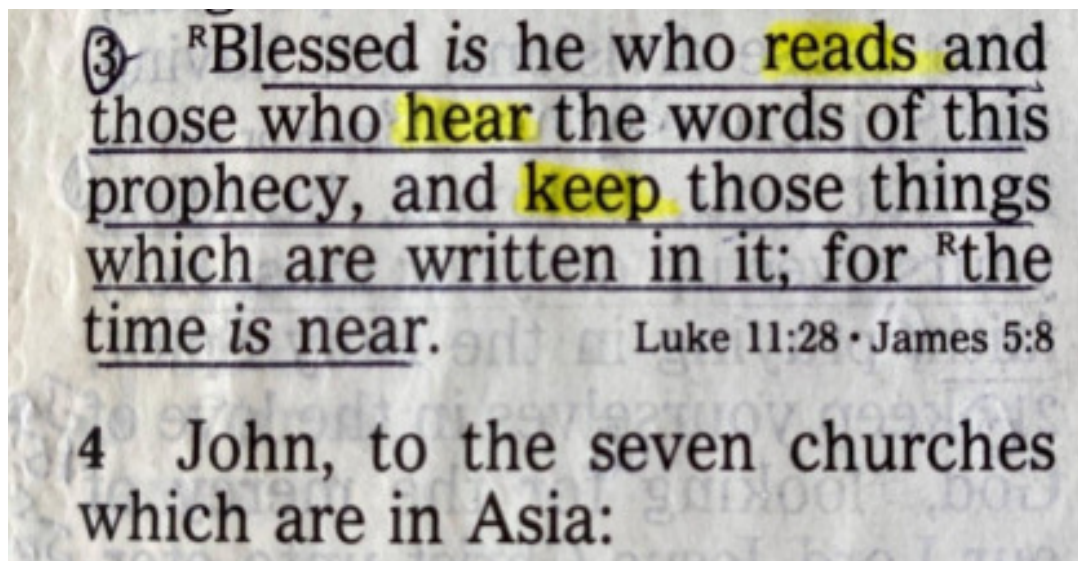


Basic Training Bible Ministries

presents

The Seven Churches of the Revelation



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The Seven Churches of the Revelation

Introduction

This book is “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*,” and is a gift given by God the Father to Jesus Christ the Son, through the Holy Spirit (Rev. 1:1, 4). For the “*seven Spirits*,” see Isaiah 11:1–2. It was sent by an angel and given to John, to send to the seven churches (1:4). The message to each church is intended for all the churches.

The word “*signified*” in 1:1 indicates that it is a book of “signs” or visual pictures. These pictures are understood by finding other places in the Scriptures that they are used. The book is dedicated to the seven churches of Asia (1:4), which were part of John’s circuit ministry. John is in exile on the island of Patmos (1:9).

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

In the first chapter, Jesus is revealed in eight ways:

1. He is the God-Man, 1:4.
2. He is the Faithful Witness, 1:5a
3. He is the Firstborn from the Dead, 1:5b.
4. He is our Loving Redeemer, 1:5c.
5. He is the One who has transformed and exalted us, 1:6.
6. He is the One who is coming again, 1:7.
7. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning, and the End, 1:8a.
8. He is God Almighty, 1:8b

The Beatitudes of Revelation

In the Revelation, there are seven blessings offered to the readers:

1. For those who teach, those who study, and those who obey its message, 1:3.
2. For all those who die in the Lord, that is, as believers, 14:13.
3. For those who stay spiritually awake and obedient, 16:15.
4. For all those who will attend the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, 19:9.
5. For all who take part in the First Resurrection, 20:6.
6. For those in the Tribulation who obey Revelation teachings, 22:7.
7. For all who “wash their robes,” (“*do His commandments*”), who will enter into the eternal city, 22:14.

The Prophetic Outline

John is given the three-fold outline of the book in Rev. 1:19. John is told to write:

1. “*The things which you have seen.*” This is the vision of Christ in Chapter 1.
2. “*The things which are,*” speaks of the present—the seven churches at the time John wrote, Chapters 2–3.
3. “*The things which will take place after this,*” that is, events to come after the Church Age.

- This includes the Church in Heaven, chapters 4–5.
- The Tribulation period, chapters 6–19.
- The thousand-year kingdom (Millennium) and the eternal state, chapters 20–22.

The Mystery Explained

John’s vision of the resurrected Christ in 1:9–16 reflects the vision of Daniel in Daniel 7:9–14. In Revelation 1:20, the Lord Jesus explains “*the mystery*” of John’s vision. Jesus Christ holds the “*seven stars*,” which represent the pastors (“*angels*”/messengers) of the “*seven churches*.” The “*seven lampstands*” represent the “*churches*,” which are intended to give light to the world.

The Seven Churches

These seven churches existed in the time of John, and he had a circuit ministry to each of them. While other churches existed at the same time, these seven were chosen to represent three things to believers of all ages:

1. **History**—they reveal to us conditions that existed in the early church.
2. **Prophecy**—they anticipate the trends of Church history from the beginning (Ephesus) down to the end of the Church Age (Laodicea).
3. **Mystery**—the messages to the churches; speaks as well as to each and every believer “*who has an ear to hear*.” In this way, the Spirit speaks to each one of us about our inner spiritual life.

The Churches Evaluated

The evaluation of the churches by Jesus Christ gives us a preview of what the Bema/Judgment seat of Christ will be like (Rom. 14:10–11; 1 Cor. 3:11–15; 2 Cor. 5:10). There is great comfort in the fact that the Lord never overlooks the good, even when it is mixed with what is not good. He will not fail to reward even feeble efforts, but He will not overlook the slightest failure either. In general, the format of the message to the churches is:

1. **Christ revealed**—God always views churches/believers in the light of Christ.
2. **Commendation**—God always encourages before He corrects.
3. **Condemnation**—God graciously reveals our weaknesses/failings to us.
4. **Correction**—God always shows us the path to correction and recovery.
5. **Comfort/promise**—God always points us to see today in light of eternity.

Two of the churches have no condemnation (Smyrna and Philadelphia), and one of them has no commendation (Laodicea). Along with the unconditional promises given to all “overcomers,” five of the churches are given additional conditional promises if they obey (Rev. 2:10, 26; 3:4, 11, 20). We will look at these in detail as they occur.

“I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”

Jeremiah 17:10

“The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of the soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

Hebrews 4:12

I. Ephesus: The Church of Faded Love, Revelation 2:1–7

The word “Ephesus” means “Beloved,” and yet they had forsaken their former love for Christ and for His people. Loss of love is the beginning of a downward spiral in the life of a believer or in a church. No relationship can survive without the love being refreshed daily.

A. Christ revealed, 2:1

Jesus holds the pastors firmly in His right hand of power, and walks in authority and fellowship among the churches (cf. 1:20). He is the Head of the Body and the risen Savior who is present among us.

B. Commendation, 2:2–3

This church had good works, labor, and patience (1 Thess. 1:3; Titus 2:14). They also rejected those who were evil and false apostles who sought to infiltrate the Church. Paul had warned Ephesus concerning this very problem (Acts 20:29–30). They had shown extreme endurance for the name of Christ without becoming weary (Gal. 6:9; 2 Thess. 3:13). How wonderful that our Lord is able to see what is acceptable in us, even when there is much to condemn! Compare the Corinthian church, which in the initial evaluation, seemed so promising (1 Cor. 1:1–9), yet was full of sinful activity.

C. Condemnation, 2:4

It is heart-breaking to hear the Lord say, *“I have this against you.”* How will we bear it if He says this to us at the Bema/Judgment Seat (1 Cor. 3:11–15)? These believers had sound doctrine, great discernment, and faithful service. But they forgot that the spiritual life is a relationship! Note that they did not “lose” their first love, as many say. They “left” it, or forsook it. Paul commended the Ephesians for their love for one another (Eph. 1:15), and for them to fully comprehend the love of Christ (Eph. 3:19). As Paul taught the Corinthians, only what we do through the love of Christ is rewardable (1 Cor. 13:1–8); 2 Cor. 5:14–21). Our love toward fellow believers comes from our love for God (1 John 3:11; 4:7, 12, 20).

D. Correction, 2:5

The spiritual solution to the faded love of these believers is three-fold. First, they must remember their early love, like Israel of old (Jer. 2:2–3; Ezek. 6:9–10; Zech. 10:9). Second, they need to repent. They need to change their mind-set back to that which restores their relationship to the Lord. And finally, they need to return to the kind of works they did in the beginning—out of love, and not out of duty. If they fail to recover, the light of their church (lampstand) will be removed.

E. Comfort/promise, 2:6–7

The Nicolaitans were those who sought to impose a hierarchy within the church. The

word literally means “rule over the people.” This is where the distinction between the “clergy” and the “laity” came from. Out of this there developed the idea of a specialized “priesthood” in the Church, contrary to the truth that every believer is a priest (1 Pet. 2:5–9; Rev. 5:9–10). Since everyone has ears, the challenge, “*He who has an ear, let him hear,*” means that every believer is accountable for what has been said. The phrase “*To him who overcomes*” should read, “To the overcomer,” and is a promise to all who believe in Jesus Christ (John 16:33; Rom. 8:37; 1 John 4:4; 5:4–5). It acts as an evangelistic invitation to all unbelievers who hear this message. The promise is to be able to eat from the tree of life in Paradise (Rev. 22:2, 14).

Practical Applications

1. The Lord Jesus Christ evaluates our lives each and every day. One day He will give us our final grade at the Bema Seat regarding our spiritual life (1 Cor. 3:11–15).
2. It is necessary for us to be devoted to good works, faithful labor, endurance, and defense of the truth. But without the love and fellowship of His Spirit, these all can be in vain (1 Cor. 13:1–3).
3. Faith can only do its work through love (Gal. 5:6, 13–14). Growing faith produces hope, and hope results in love (1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4–5; 1 Thess. 1:3).

II. Smyrna: The Church of Faithful Love, Revelation 2:8–11

The word “Smyrna” means “Myrrh,” an incense used in the anointing oil (Exo. 30:23) and a picture of the grace of God (Psa. 45:7–8). It was a gift of the wisemen to the infant Christ (Matt. 2:11), and was brought by Nicodemus to anoint the body of the Lord Jesus (John 19:39). Smyrna was called “the ornament of Asia.”

A. Christ Revealed, 2:8

This is the one church whose “*angel*” we know historically. His name was Polycarp, and he was a student of the apostle John. During the persecutions, he was burned at the stake at the age of 86 in 168 A.D. He died after saying, “How can I blaspheme my King and Savior?” Jesus speaks to this church as “*the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life.*” As the resurrected Christ, He gives comfort to those who may soon give their lives for Him.

B. Commendation, 2:9

This church was faithful to serve and suffer in spite of their poverty. Like the Church in India, Asia, and Africa, they were materially poor, yet they are spiritually rich. Their riches are the spiritual treasures of God’s heavenly store-house (Eph. 1:3, 18; 2:7; 3:8, 16; Heb. 11:26). They withstood the persecutions of the unbelieving Jews, who were not true Jews (Rom. 2:28–29; 9:6–7). Those who re-opened the Temple after the veil was rent (Matt. 27:51) are called “*the synagogue of Satan.*”

C. Condemnation

This church and that of Philadelphia receive no rebuke or reproach. What examples that we should seek to emulate! It appears that those who suffer for their faith tend to remain

faithful. And those who may not suffer, but are devoted to the missionary endeavor to lead others to Christ, are purified in their devotion.

D. Correction

Because there is no condemnation, there is no need for correction. This is an amazing thing, for no believer or any group of believers is without fault. How can this be? It shows that they were living in close fellowship with the Lord, daily judging themselves, so they needed no judgment (1 Cor. 11:31; 1 John 1:9).

E. Comfort/promise, 2:10–11

The comfort of our Lord to these suffering saints comes in the form of a command, a condition, and a promise.

1. **The command**— “*Do not fear.*” Literally, He says, “Fear nothing.” This command is in the middle voice, which means they must overcome their natural fears with faith (Psalm 56:3). He honestly tells them that prison, and even death for some, is coming. In times of persecution, it is crucial to face up to reality, and not weaken others with maudlin sentimentality.
2. **The condition**— “*Be faithful until death,*” which, if this condition is met, will result in “*the crown of life*” being given at the Bema Seat (James 1:12).
3. **The promise**—The overcomer (those who believe in Jesus Christ, 1 John 5:4–5) will never be hurt by the Second Death (Rev. 20:6, 14; 21:8).

Practical Applications

1. How can we live lives above reproach like those in Smyrna?

The Five Daily Disciplines:

- a. **Wash**—We need to sanctify/purify ourselves daily (John 13:5; Eph. 5:26; 1 John 1:9).
 - b. **Eat**—We need to feed on the Bread of Life (Matt. 4:4; John 6:35, 48, 51).
 - c. **Walk**—We need to walk in the light of faith and love (John 8:12; Eph. 4:1; 5:2, 8; 1 John 1:7).
 - d. **Work**—Each day we are allotted a work for each of us to accomplish (Matt. 25:15; Mark 13:34; Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 2:10).
 - e. **Rest**—Every day has its own trials (Matt. 6:34), and we need to learn to rest in the promises of God (Matt. 11:28–30; Heb. 4:11).
2. What are the five crowns that are available to us?

The Five Crowns of Faithfulness:

- a. **Imperishable**—given for spiritual self-discipline (1 Cor. 9:24–27).
- b. **Joy**—given to those who win others to Christ (Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19).
- c. **Righteousness**—To those living in light of Christ’s coming (2 Tim. 4:8).

- d. **Life**—To those who endure temptations/trials faithfully (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10).
- e. **Glory**—To those faithful in the field of their ministry (1 Pet. 5:4).

III. Pergamos: The Church of False Doctrine, Revelation 2:12–17

The city of Pergamos was famous for three things: its great library of ancient books, its production of parchment for writing, and its temple to Aesculapius, a god called a “healer” and given the title “savior,” whose symbol was the serpent. The city was rich, but the church had become worldly through compromise. Pergamos was also the center of Caesar worship, where they proclaimed, “Caesar is Lord.”

A. Christ Revealed, 2:12

Jesus is revealed here as the one “*who has the sharp two-edged sword*” (see 1:16). This is a reference to His Word (Heb. 4:12), which can bring either judgment or comfort (Rev. 19:15).

B. Commendation, 2:13

The Lord always knows the conditions under which we live. He has compassion for difficult circumstances, but no toleration for compromise of the truth. This church was under constant pressure to deny that “*Jesus is Lord*” (Rom. 10:9–13), but had remained faithful even through the martyrdom of Antipas. The worship of the god Asclepius, whose symbol was the serpent, represented “Satan’s throne” in the city, as also did the Imperial cult, which demanded the pledge, “Caesar is Lord.”

C. Condemnation, 2:14–15

In spite of their faithful witness, they had compromised with those who held to the doctrine of Balaam (Num. 22–25). This doctrine believed in ministry for hire, and in compromise to the point of engaging in idol feasts and fornication (Acts 15:29), which was all part of the religion in Pergamum. They also tolerated those who taught the doctrine of the Nicolaitans—the specialized priesthood within the church (2:6).

D. Correction, 2:16

The only solution is repentance—a change of mind and activity—and a restoration to complete faith and obedience to God’s Word. If they fail to do this, then Jesus will judge them using the “*sword*” of His mouth. The word for sword here is not the *machaira*, the Roman short-sword (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12), but rather *Romphaia*, the sword of judgment (Rev. 19:15).

E. Comfort/promise, 2:17

The overcomers are promised hidden manna, which speaks of a deeper understanding of eternal truth, a white stone indicating divine approval, and a new name, like that given to Abraham, Sarah, and Israel (Gen. 17:5, 15; 32:27–28).

Practical Applications

1. The great danger to the Church all throughout history is that of compromise with the surrounding world system.

2. The threat of persecution causes many to consider compromise as a “sensible” way of avoiding conflict.
3. All who trust in Christ have overcome the world (John 16:33; Rom. 8:37; 1 John 5:4–5). However, we must never cease to overcome the tests and trials of life through faith and obedience.

The Three Keys to Overcoming (Rev. 12:11)

“And they overcame him (the devil) by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.”

- a. **Faith** in the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:16).
- b. **Knowledge** of the Word of God as the basis of our testimony.
- c. **Faithfulness**, even to the point of martyrdom.

IV. Thyatira: The Church of Rampant Immorality, Revelation 2:18–29

The longest of the letters to the seven churches was to Thyatira. Though the smallest and most insignificant of the seven cities, Thyatira was a military outpost, as well as a thriving commercial center. Lydia, the first convert to faith in Christ in Europe, was a merchant from Thyatira (Acts 16:14–15). Thyatira’s insignificance did not make the church there unimportant to the Lord. Anything that infects one church will soon infect others. One significant thing about Thyatira was that they had a cult built around a woman called the *Sambathe*, who was an oracle spouting fortune-teller.

A. Christ Revealed, 2:18

The “eyes of fire” and “feet of brass” are symbols of judgment. They speak of divine omniscience and justice. This picture of Christ comes from Daniel 10:6. Yet, the eyes that see and the feet that judge do not overlook what may be praised in the church (Heb. 6:10).

B. Commendation, 2:19

If we read the text like this, *“I know your works: love, service, faith, and your patience...,”* we can see that love produces service, and faith results in patient endurance. There is no absence of devotion and faith in the church, but it is threatened by the tolerance (possibly in the name of love and unity) of false doctrine and immorality.

C. Condemnation, 2:20

This “Jezebel” took her character from the Old Testament wife of Ahab (1 Kings 16:29–33). The charge against the church is that they *“allow”* the influence of this Jezebel. The word means “to permit, to tolerate, on an ongoing basis.” This Jezebel falsely claimed the role of a prophetess, but her teachings were contrary to biblical truth. She taught a compromise of idolatry and sexual immorality. The *“fornication”* that is mentioned here may have been the spiritual adultery of doctrines of demons (v. 24, 1 Tim. 4:1). Tolerance of false teaching opens the door to self-destructive conduct.

D. Correction, 2:21–23

Even in a case of such blatant rebellion against God, there is space given for repentance. This is evidence of the matchless grace of God. When we see those involved in great evil, seemingly going on unrestrained, it is good to remember that God always gives grace before judgment. The problem is that those of hardened heart often presume that because judgment has not come, it will not. This is the error of the heart blinded by sin.

Because of continued rebellion, judgment must now come. A great trial of illness would sweep through the church, afflicting those involved in this corrupt cult. Yet even while the judgment falls, there is still the call to repent. Her “*children*,” or followers, would suffer a terrible death, so that this evil would not infiltrate other churches. Christ would demonstrate His power to search the depths of every soul, and to deal with each according to their works (Jer. 11:20; Rom. 2:6; Heb. 4:12–13).

E. Comfort/promise, 2:24–29

In this longest of the seven letters, there is the most extended word of comfort. First, for the faithful in Thyatira, they would suffer no further burdens of affliction or persecution. But they are challenged to firmly hold their spiritual ground. Note that in addition to the typical unconditional promise to the overcomers (believers), there is an additional conditional promise—if they keep His works till the end, they will gain rulership over the nations. It must never be forgotten that our rank, inheritance, and role in eternity will be equal to our faithfulness here and now (Rom. 2:6; 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12). The greatest motivation to faithfulness is to remember that Christ is coming again (Titus 2:13)!

There is the additional promise of reward, “*I will give him the morning star.*” At the original creation, the angels (“*the morning stars*”) “*sang together ... and ... shouted for joy*” (Job 38:7). Originally Lucifer, the “*anointed Cherub*” was called “*the morning star*” (Isa. 14:12). Further, the Lord Jesus identifies Himself as “*the Bright and Morning Star*” in Revelation 22:16. All of this indicates that Lucifer once held a special relationship to the Lord Jesus, led the angels in praise of His glory, and held a position of great authority. So also will those believers who have been “*faithful to the end.*” The point is that what the Lord Jesus is to you now, in your heart, He will be then in experiential reality (2 Pet. 1:19).

Practical Applications

1. The call to each and every believer is always to be dedicated to Jesus Christ and to avoid compromise with the world (Rom. 12:1–2).
2. Constant attention must be given to the accurate teaching of God’s Word, lest we drift away from it (Heb. 2:1–3).
3. If we are indifferent to sound teaching, and fail to seek it out, it is inevitable that we will drift into the ways of the world around us (Eph. 4:17–19). The great hallmark of worldliness is not so much its sinfulness, but rather its indifference to God.
4. No matter how far we may have strayed, the way of repentance and recovery is always open to us (Luke 15:17–24).

V. Sardis: The Church of Operational Death, Revelation 3:1–6

Sardis means “remnant” or “those who escape.” In the 6th century before Christ, Sardis was one of the greatest cities in the ancient world. The wealth of Sardis was great, and the legendary King Croesus reigned here. The phrase “As rich as Croesus” came from his many treasures. The city sat on a narrow plateau, 1500 feet high, and was considered impregnable. But the city actually fell three times, and always in the same way. Herodotus tells us that soldiers climbed up a chute in the rock cliffs to find the city walls unguarded—so sure were they of their security. This gives added meaning to Jesus’ command, “*Be watchful*” (v. 2).

A. Christ Revealed, 3:1a

Jesus is revealed as the “[One] *who has the seven Spirits and [holds] the seven stars.*” Again, the “*seven Spirits*” comes from Isaiah 11:2, speaking of the Messianic gifts of the Holy Spirit. It can also refer to the Spirit as present and empowering the seven churches, and the seven “*stars*” or pastors of the churches. Here, we see our Lord in His presence and power in the midst of the churches, and guiding and correcting the pastors of those churches.

B. Commendation, 3:4

The commendation here is belated and comes after the rebuke and correction. Even in spiritually dead Sardis, there are those faithful believers who are sanctified and obedient. They will receive special garments in eternity, and have special intimate fellowship with the Lord in His kingdom. Since all believers will be dressed in white, representing Christ’s imputed righteousness, these garments will reflect the “righteous deeds and actions of these believers” (Rev. 19:8). Again, it is crucial for us to understand that how we live our lives here and now will determine our rank, wealth, and honor in the world to come (2 Tim. 2:12).

C. Condemnation, 3:1b

Though considered by men to be a living church, the Lord looks into the hearts and minds of these believers and declares them to be “*dead.*” This is not referring to lack of salvation, but rather to a lack of spirituality (1 Tim. 5:6). This is what we speak of as “operational death.” It is the deadness of carnality—the deadness of a fruitless life (James 2:26). They have many works, but because they are not produced from fellowship with Christ in the power of the Spirit, they are “*dead works*” (Heb. 6:1; 9:14).

The Path to Operational Death, Galatians 5:1–5:

1. It begins with when a believer forsakes the liberty of grace and truth, and trades it for the bondage of legalism (Gal. 5:1).
2. The moment one substitutes works for grace, all of the profit of our union with Christ is forfeit (Gal. 5:2). This means the filling, leading, and “*fruit of the Spirit*” (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:22–23; Eph. 5:18) are replaced either by “grieving the Spirit” through sin (Eph. 4:30), or the “quenching of the Spirit” by the substitution of human good over divine good produced by the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19).

3. The attempt to produce our own righteousness by works makes us “*a debtor to keep the whole law*” (Gal. 5: 3).
4. Failure to rest in the empowering ministry of the Spirit brings about alienation from Christ’s fellowship and power (Gal. 5: 4).
5. This is the condition called “falling from grace” (Gal. 5: 4b). This is not loss of salvation (Paul is writing to Galatian believers/ brethren, Gal. 1:11), but an attempt to do in the flesh what can only be done in the Spirit (Gal. 3:1–4).

D. Correction, 3:2–3

Five commands are given this church in order to recover from their spiritually dead state:

1. **Wake up!** The translation “*Be watchful*” misses the point. The command in the present imperative means, “become awake.” The carnal believer is asleep and needs to be shaken awake. Paul’s command to the Ephesians captures this idea perfectly.

*“Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light” (Eph. 5:14).*

2. **Strengthen!** This command carries the sense of urgency! Though this was a “*dead*” church, it had been built on the sure foundation of faith in Christ and His word (1 Cor. 3:11). That foundation remained, and needed to be strengthened and stabilized.
3. **Remember!** Like the prodigal in the pigpen, there are times when we need to come to our senses (Luke 15:17). We need to remember the joy of life in the freedom of Christ and in the power of His Spirit.
4. **Hold fast!** This word means “to guard something of great value.” We have been given the “*unsearchable riches of Christ*” (Eph. 1:3, 7, 18; 2:7; 3:8).
5. **Repent!** The basic idea of repentance is the realization that we are on the wrong path, and we must change our mind and our direction.

E. Comfort/promise, 3:5–6

Overcomers, those who are in Christ (John 16:33; Rom. 8:37; 1 John 5:4–5), will be clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and none will have their names “blotted out of the book of life” (Phil. 4:3; Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:15). Having confessed Jesus Christ on this earth, they will have their names confessed by Jesus before the Father in Heaven (Matt. 10:32–33; Luke 12:8–9). I take the call to “*hear*” not only as directed to believers to heed the call to correction, but also as being evangelistic. There are many who are unsaved who hear these messages. To them it is a call to trust in Jesus Christ before it is too late.

Practical Applications

1. When any child of God lives a religious life, but fails to maintain fellowship with God, all their effort produces is “*dead works*” (Heb. 6:1; 9:14).
2. Those called “*worthy*” in Sardis maintained genuine spirituality in the midst of the dead orthodoxy of the majority. They lived by faith and walked in the light of God’s

Word through the filling and guiding ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 8:12; 15:4–10; 2 Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:16).

3. When a believer is “sleep-walking” through life, someone needs to awaken them and challenge them to take their spiritual life seriously.

VI. Philadelphia: The Church of the Open Door, Revelation 3:7–13

The name Philadelphia comes from two Greek words meaning “Brotherly love.” It was situated near the borders of Lydia and Phrygia, and was intended to spread the Greek language and culture as a means of establishing peace. Thus, it had a cultural missionary purpose, and the church reflected this. The church of Philadelphia was not only missionary in outreach, but in time, became the center of Christianity in Asia Minor, and lasted until the fourteenth century.

A. Christ Revealed, 3:7

The Lord identifies Himself as Holy and True—His life and His Word are one and the same. He is the Living Word (John 1:1–4). He has the key of David’s eternal kingdom (Isa. 9:6–7; 22:22), and the authority to open the door to the “*New Jerusalem*” (Rev. 3:12) to all who receive eternal life, and to close it to all who reject the gift of God.

B. Commendation, 3:8

Jesus Christ always knows, not only our works, but the attitude and motive behind them. Sardis had works without faith (v. 1). Here, the works of this church are acceptable. Though they have but little strength, they have been faithful and obedient, and at no time have they denied the name of Jesus. They are promised an open door for greater missionary outreach (Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3).

C. Condemnation (none), 3:9

Like the church of Smyrna, this church has no condemnation. However, they do have enemies, called here “*the synagogue of Satan.*” Much of the early persecution against the church came from unbelieving Jews. Remember that Paul declares that those who reject Christ are not true Jews—or Israel—because Abraham was called in faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 2:28–29; 4:1–3; 9:1–9). In the end, every knee will bow, and every tongue confess Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:10–11), and will know the love that Christ has given to the saints (Isa. 60:14). This could also mean that some of their enemies would come to faith through their efforts, and therefore would bow down together with them in the end.

D. Correction (none)

E. Comfort/promise, 3:10–13

Because of their faithful endurance, they will be delivered out of the “*hour of trial.*” Many take this as a promise of future deliverance from the coming Tribulation. The problem is that this forces us to take a partial-Rapture view, since the promise is only to those who are faithful. The world has known many “hours of trial,” and it is better to take this as a promise of deliverance to faithful believers, not from, but through those trials, as with Paul in 2 Timothy 3:11. Those “*who dwell on the earth*” is a phrase used often in Revelation and speaks of those who are at home in this world.

The promise that He is coming quickly emphasizes the unknown hour of His arrival. It is a challenge to “*hold fast ... that no one may take your crown.*” The crowns are the highest form of eternal rewards, and require those who seek them to finish the race strong (2 Tim. 4:6–8). In ancient times heroes would have a pillar erected in their honor, inscribed with a record of their feats. God will do this for faithful believers, as well as marking them with a special identity relating them to the Father, the Son, and the Eternal City.

Practical Applications

1. Every believer should seek to emulate these Philadelphian saints.
2. Greatness in God’s eyes is not based on ability, but on availability.
3. It is not whether you are in a position of prominence or power, but whether you are faithful where God has placed you.
4. The race of life does not require speed—it is endurance that always wins.
5. You may not have much in spiritual assets, but you can always gain more. And above all, you can hold fast to what you have!

VII. Laodicea: The Church of Lukewarm Complacency, Revelation 3:14–22

This is the church that makes Jesus sick! It is sad to say that this church is the model of far too many churches of today. There is nothing wrong with wealth, big buildings, and expensive trappings—unless they take the place of Jesus Christ. It is not unusual today for the discerning believer to enter into a church with all the frenzied activities, only to sense that He has been pushed outside. The city of Laodicea was a rich, commercial and banking center. It was known for the manufacturing of garments and for its medical center, which produced eye salve. The name “Laodicea” comes from two Greek words meaning “rule by the people.” They had rejected the Lord’s rule in their lives.

A. Christ Revealed, 3:14

Jesus is the very essence of truth—the “*Amen, the Faithful and True Witness.*” He Himself is the dynamic Source and Origin of all God’s creation (John 1:1–4; Col. 1:15–18; Heb. 1:8–13). This introduction emphasizes the need of this church to accept His Word as their final authority.

B. Commendation (none)

How tragic that Jesus Christ has absolutely nothing good to say about this church. If they had any redeeming qualities, Jesus would have mentioned them, but there were none. And even in this condition, He reminds them of His love for them (v. 19).

C. Condemnation, 3:15–17

There is nothing so nauseating to the Lord than apathy and indifference. Better even to be hostile, than to be lukewarm. To the Greeks, the worthwhile life had to have a balance of *ethos* (character), *pathos* (passion), and *logos* (logic/truth). Take away the passion, and nothing worthwhile remains. Truth becomes cold facts, and character is only empty display.

The most pitiful condition is that of complacent self-sufficiency. This is how many Christians in the third world see the Church in America. Through their eyes, the words of the Laodicean church fitly apply to the wealthy, self-centered, complacent churches of this country. Tragically, they are not far wrong in too many cases. But Jesus Christ sees the true spiritual condition of the soul, “*wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.*”

The three things the Laodiceans prided themselves on—their gold, their garments, their eye salve—have spiritual equivalents, which they lack. The pure gold of refined faith (1 Pet. 1:6–9), the clothing of humility (1 Pet. 5:5), and clear spiritual vision (Matt. 6:22–23; Eph. 1:18), all these they were lacking. These can only be purchased by faith and obedience.

D. Correction, 3:18

The three things Laodiceans prided themselves on, their gold, their garments, their eye-salve – these have spiritual equivalents, which they lack. The pure gold of refined faith (1 Pet. 1:6–9), the clothing of humility (1 Pet. 5:5), and clear spiritual vision (Matt. 6:22–23; Eph. 1:18), were all lacking. These can only be acquired by faith and obedience.

E. Comfort/promise, 3:19–21

How amazing that, even in their impoverished, apathetic, spiritual condition, the Lord reminds them of His steadfast love! His rebuke and chastening always come from the motive of love.

The Father’s Discipline (Heb. 12:5–11)

1. The motive is always His perfect and steadfast love.
2. Discipline ignored brings greater severity (rebuke, chastening, scourging).
3. Discipline is a proof of salvation. God only disciplines His own children.
4. Discipline restores us to an attitude of respect and reverence for God.
5. When we respond in humility and faith, discipline results in peace with God and righteousness in life.

The story of the prodigal son is a beautiful portrayal of these points (Luke 15:11–32). The elder son is also an example of the misery of those who refuse to be corrected.

The invitation is given to each and every believer to respond to the knocking of Christ at the door of his or her life. God often “knocks” through trials, sufferings, and self-induced misery. The option is always there for us to open the door to Him, let Him take His rightful place on the throne of our lives, and restore us to peace and spiritual prosperity. The life that is lived in fellowship with Jesus Christ is rich, regardless of what one possesses. Failure to open the door is to make Him an outcast Savior and a helpless Deliverer (Jer. 14:8–9).

All who trust in Christ have been spiritually seated with Him in His heavenly kingdom (Eph. 2:5–7; Col. 3:1–4). We are also given the promise that each of us will play a part in His rule (Rev. 20:6; 22:5). However, we should always remember that the degree of our rule in the heavenly kingdom will correspond to our faithfulness in this life (Matt. 25:14–23; Luke 19:15–19).

Conclusion

1. The chief lesson from these churches is the infinite and unfailing love of Jesus Christ for each of us.
2. Both Smyrna and Philadelphia challenge us to keep short accounts, purify our lives daily, and strive to be blameless before the Lord.
3. The failings in the churches are a warning to us of things that threaten our own faithfulness.
4. The day will come when each and every believer will stand before the Lord for the evaluation of our lives (1 Cor. 3:11–15; 2 Cor. 5:9–10). The messages to the seven churches is a challenge to us to come to that time unashamed (1 John 2:28–3:3).

The message to the seven churches is rich with application to our own lives. Let us each be faithful to claim the blessings promised to those who read, give heed, and who guard—as a precious treasure—the words of Christ (Rev. 1:3)!